

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM AND HIS SYSTEM OF CATECHESIS

Ján PILKO

Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Presov, Presov, Slovakia

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENT OF THE CATECHESIS

Cyril's catecheses, while belonging to the broader context of early Christian doctrine, have several characteristics that distinguish them from the works of other Church Fathers.

Pedagogical approach:

- Focus on the catechumens: Cyril's primary focus was on catechumens, that is, people who were preparing to receive baptism. His catecheses were therefore designed to be understandable to the laity and to give them a solid foundation in the faith.

- Clarity and comprehensibility: Cyril was characterised by a clear and understandable presentation of doctrine. He used many examples and images from everyday life to illustrate complex theological truths.

- Emotional experience: In addition to rational explanation, Cyril also emphasised the emotional experience of faith. He sought to awaken in his listeners a longing for God and for a deeper spiritual life.

Emphasis on liturgy:

- A mystagogical approach: In his catecheses, Cyril closely linked theological truths with the liturgy. He explained the meaning of the various liturgical actions and symbols so that the catechumens could better grasp the meaning of the celebration.

Twenty-four catecheses were given by Cyril during Lent and Holy Week in 348 AD. Some authors give the years 348 to 350. [4] The preparatory catechesis is a general introduction in which the catechumens are made aware of the aim of their education and how they should behave during their preparation. Because of the time-consuming and lengthy nature of the catechism lessons, Cyril advised them to set aside all worldly concerns for eight weeks and devote themselves to Scripture reading, study, and prayer. Cyril asks those who are "preparing for

enlightenment" to devote themselves to a certain spiritual discipline and to continue attending services as diligently as they now attend catechism classes.

The entire catechism was designed for twenty catecheses. Scholars are at a loss to know what happened during the last twenty days of Great Lent, because in some of the discourses Cyril explicitly mentions that the previous catechesis was yesterday. It is possible that on those days when Cyril was distracted by church matters, others were busy with those preparing to receive Holy Baptism.

Cyril advised the catechumens to study on their own only those books that were permitted to be read in the temple during the services. He strongly urged the catechumens not to touch non-canonical and apocryphal books, lest they "trample on the Church's regulations". [9]

It must be said that Cyril's position on this matter was not shared, for example, by the Alexandrian teachers. Origen recommended the books of Esther, and the Wisdom of Solomon to the catechumens because they were more intelligible than some canonical writings. St. Athanasius of Alexandria added to Origen's list the book, Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas. Both the Alexandrian view and Cyril's view reflected only one of the local traditions, which it would be erroneous to regard as establishing the whole Church.

Egeria pointed out that "in these parts all the faithful can follow the text of Scripture when it is read in the temple, for they have been instructed about everything for forty days". It may be assumed that the catechumens were familiar with the calendar of the church readings and were shown how to find the proper place in the Holy Scriptures according to the division of the text adopted in Jerusalem. As is well known, the division of Holy Scripture into chapters and verses that we use today was introduced successively in the thirteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the time of the pilgrim Egeria, who visited Jerusalem in the second half of the fourth century, classes began very early, at six o'clock in the morning, and lasted for three hours. This arrangement allowed those who could not leave work for long periods to attend classes regularly [9]. In contrast to the homilies at the regular service, the lessons were systematic. To miss one such meeting was to lose a coherent thread of catechesis.

Previously, during the homily at the liturgy, the catechumens stood in the westernmost part of the basilica, closer to the east. Therefore, only an indistinct echo reached them, hence the homonym "catechumens", Cyril joked, playing with words. [9] The catechumens, according to the saying, heard the bell but did not know where it was. Now they were seated at the feet of the bishop himself and had the opportunity not only to listen but also to ask him questions.

For the catechumens, Lent was a time of repentance, analysis of intentions and actions, confession of sins and forgiveness of neighbors. In his first

catecheses, Cyril dealt at length with these aspects of the spiritual life, citing many biblical examples. This basic education of the will and conscience was followed by a systematic catechization of the Church's teaching. After a brief introductory catechesis, Cyril for the first time verified in the ears of those who were "preparing to receive Holy Baptism" the precise formula of the faith. This procedure was called the transmission of the symbol of faith (*traditio symboli*). [9]

In subsequent meetings he explained the meaning of the symbol, each part of the symbol in turn, word by word. During this time, those who were "preparing for Holy Baptism" had to memorize the symbol and repeat it to each other and to their guarantors - the godparent. At the end of the preparation, they were to "return" the symbol to the Church. The "return of the symbol" (*redditio symboli*) was, at this stage, the culmination of all the catechumen's catechetical preparation.

At the end of the five-week catechesis, they would receive the profession of faith (*accipient symbolum*). Each article (*singulorum sermonum*) of the Creed is explained separately. At the end of the seventh week there remains the last week before Pascha, which is called Holy Week. Early in the morning [on Holy Monday] the bishop enters the temple, the Martyria section. The bishop's place is located in the depth of the apse behind the altar. There, one by one ("those preparing for baptism"), men with their (godfathers) and women with their (godmothers), ascend and "return" to the bishop the profession of faith (*reddet symbolum*).

After they have "returned" the symbol (*reddito simbolo*), the bishop addresses everyone and says: "During the past seven weeks you have been instructed in the law of Scripture and have listened to the teaching of the faith. You have heard about the resurrection of the body, and all that is necessary for catechumens to know about the meaning of faith has been explained to you. Baptism, however, is indeed a higher mystery, of which you, as catechumens, were forbidden to hear. Do not think that you will never hear about it, for after you have been baptised in the name of Christ, during the eight days after Pascha (the Resurrection of Jesus Christ), after the Liturgy in the Temple of the Resurrection, you will be told everything you need to know about it. For as long as you remain catechumens, the deepest mysteries of God will remain hidden from you." [3]

According to a late 4th century Jerusalem custom, those who were "preparing to receive Holy Baptism" were given a symbol by the bishop at the beginning of the sixth week of Great Lent. Two weeks later, on Holy Monday, they would recite it by heart before the bishop in the presence of their

godparents. By comparison, in the Ephesian metropolis, the "return of the symbol" took place on Holy Thursday.

The calendar of Bible readings for these days was drawn up in accordance with the themes of the catechetical sessions. In the opinion of many pilgrims, the calendar of the Jerusalem Church was extremely well done. The Etruria repeatedly draws attention to the fact that the biblical readings, as well as the hymns, always corresponded to the time and place in Jerusalem. [2] The Jerusalem church calendar was later used in Armenia and Georgia, where it was brought by pilgrims. [3]

The Dogmatic Catechesis of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem

By the end of the second century, the Church's doctrine of God had already acquired a distinct Trinitarian structure, which we find in St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen, and in the catechetical practice of the community of Hippolytus. There is no doubt that these teachers used creedal formulations in their catecheses. It is even possible that there was a rite in Hippolytus' community which later developed into the "handing over" and "returning of the symbol" before the bishop, although we cannot say this with absolute certainty. In the Catechism of Irenaeus the Creed occupies an important chapter. Irenaeus, however, was far from constructing his catechism like Cyril, who followed the plan of the Creed from beginning to end. The general plan of Irenaeus' catechism is the history of salvation and the Old Testament predictions about Christ, not the Creed. Origen, in his *On Origins*, approaches the idea of the catechism as a commentary on the creed. Strictly speaking, however, Origen's work cannot be called a catechism because it was intended for a very philosophically and theologically savvy audience. [3]

Cyril's catechetical homilies can be considered the first attempt at a consistent presentation of the catechism in the form of a detailed commentary on the faith. Starting from the local creed, Cyril devotes four lessons to the doctrine of God the Father, six more to the Son, two to the Holy Spirit, one to the resurrection of the dead, and the last to the Church. Since Cyril was obviously pressed for time, as he mentions several times at the end of the catecheses, he was forced to give up one homily on the Holy Spirit and combine the two topics - the resurrection of the dead and the Church - into one catechesis. No definite system can be discerned in his exposition. Sometimes one word of a symbol, for example, calling God the Father "Almighty," became for Cyril the theme of an entire sermon. At other times he discussed several members of a symbol in a single lesson. There is also a polemical element in his interpretation. Cyril's main

opponents are the common pagan misconceptions about the nature of God and man, not the heretical parties in the Church. Cyril was aware that the heated dogmatic debates that flared up in the fourth century were turning many pagans away from Christianity rather than encouraging their conversion.

In explaining the Church's teaching about God the Father, Cyril touches on such traditional themes as the unity of God and his sovereignty over the created world. In Cyril's sermons there is an emphasis on the incomprehensibility and inexhaustibility of the divine essence, which is central to fourth-century Orthodox theology. God reveals his ineffable power and wisdom in the diversity and harmony of the created world.

He develops the doctrine of God on the basis of the words of the Symbol of Faith, "I believe in one God." He begins by pointing out that the Father does not have one glory and the Son another, but one and the same, for He is the only Son of the Father, and when the Father is glorified, the Son also shares the glory with Him. The glory of the Son proceeds from the glory of the Father, and when glory is given to the Son, the Father is also glorified. [9]

Cyril says: "If anyone tries to talk about God, let him first describe the structure of the earth. If he cannot testify to its composition, how can he speak of its Creator?"[1] He is describing God's omnipotence on the basis of the created world and the universe. Man can never understand God with his reason, so it is very difficult to describe God in human words. Cyril, on the other hand, speaks of God very simply on the basis of the stars, which man can never count. He points to man's powerlessness, which he compares to God's omnipotence. "He has numbered all the raindrops that fall on the whole earth, not only now, but at all times." [1] What God is in His essence, none of us can fully know or understand. According to our abilities and possibilities, God is known to us primarily through His creation. [6]

The angels also see the face of God, [Mt 18:10] but not as He is, but only as they are able to see Him. Isus Christos himself says: "Not that anyone has seen the Father; only he who is from God has seen the Father." [Jn 6:46] Only the Son and the Holy Spirit know the Father completely. For no one knows the Father but the Son and the one to whom the Son reveals him. [Mt 11:27]. Only the Son, as well as the Holy Spirit, share the same Godhead with the Father. "Only He who is born without change before the ages of ages knows Him who begets, and He who begets knows Him who is begotten." [9]

When Cyril moves on to the Christological part of the Creed, he discusses the eternal birth of the Son from the Father, His earthly birth from the Virgin, the crucifixion and burial, the proofs of the resurrection, and the judgment of the living and the dead. In discussing the relationship of the Father and the Son,

Cyril avoided using the term "consubstantial," which has been the subject of controversy, although in general his theology is close in spirit to the decision of the Council of Nicaea.

Whoever does not receive baptism, says St. Cyril, has no salvation, except the martyrs, who even without water obtain the Kingdom of Heaven. Christos redeemed the world by the cross, and after the piercing, blood and water came out of his side. For some to be baptized with water, for others to be baptized with their own blood at the time of persecution. For even martyrdom was called baptism by the Saviour when he said: "Can you drink the cup that I drink? Or can you be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" [Mk 10:38]. Jesus Christ sanctified baptism by having himself baptized. He did not baptize himself in order to obtain forgiveness of sins, since as God he is without sin, but in order to bestow blessedness on those who receive holy baptism. [9] Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and he begins his gospel ministry only after his baptism in the Jordan River. He began to proclaim the Gospel only after the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. Of course, Christ, the Son of God, as one of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, did not need to see the Holy Spirit, but to be seen by John, who baptized him, since he did not know him either, as it is written, "Neither did I know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me: On whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and resting on him, the same is he that baptizeth with the Holy Ghost." [Jn 1:33]

SUMMARY

In conclusion, we could evaluate Cyril's catechesis as an excellent biblical interpretation of the whole of human history from Adam to the apostolic activity in the early Church. Few early Christian authors have been able to make such ingenious use of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in their catecheses and to connect them with the theology of the Church. Herein lies Cyril's genius and his outstanding knowledge of the biblical field.

His twenty-four catecheses were one of the best didactic manuals in the age of the catechumenate. This refers especially to its single-mindedness and the biblical comprehensiveness with which the truth of God was explained to catechumens preparing to receive Holy Baptism. Thus, among the most striking features of St. Cyril of Jerusalem is his biblicism.

His entire catechetical work reflects all the problems and misunderstandings of the period between the First and Second General Councils. [8] Cyril tried to point out the wrong thinking of the Arians, but also of many other heresies that were fighting against the Church. Against this Arian heresy the Symbol of Faith was adopted at the First General Council of Nicaea (r. 325), which he discussed

at length in his catecheses. His catecheses influenced many ecclesiastical writers both in the East and in the West. In the West it was especially Blessed Augustine, whose catechetical writings were based on Cyril's context and his systematic method, but were intended for those who were already more advanced in the faith. [1]

Cyril's catecheses have not lost their relevance even today, almost 1700 years later. Their simplicity makes it possible for those who are not of the Orthodox faith to know the depth of Orthodox thought and spiritual life. This does not mean, however, that they should not also be used for contemporary believers who, because of certain, mainly political, problems of the last century, have not been sufficiently catechized. The possibility of their use is especially in the present trend of recatechization, which is needed in many ecclesial communities. [5]

REFERENCES

1. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, GREGORY NAZIANZEN. In: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Volume 7. Hendrickson Publishers 1995.
2. EGERIA: *Púť do Svätej zeme. Itinerarium Egeriae*. Bratislava : Teologická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity, 2006. 222 p. ISBN 80-7141-539-1.
3. GAVRILYUK, P. 2001. *History of Catechesis in the Ancient Church*. Moscow : St. Philaret's Moscow Higher Orthodox Christian School, 2001, 320 p. /ГАВРИЛЮК, П. 2001. *История катехизации в древней церкви*. Москва : Свято-Филаретовская московская высшая православно-христианская школа, 2001, 320 с./
4. NOVOTNÝ, J. 1999. *Basil Veliký a jeho doba*. Velehrad, 1999.
5. PILKO, J. 2022. *Katechéza v cirkvi. Katechetické spisy v prvých storočiach kresťanstva*. 1. vyd. Prešov : Pravoslávna bohoslovecká fakulta, 2022. 219 p. ISBN 978-80-555-2992-9.
6. PRUŽINSKÝ, Š. 2003. *Patrológia II*. Prešov 2003. 479 p. ISBN 80-8068-203-8.
7. SVÄTÝ AUGUSTÍN. 2005. *Katechetické spisy*. Praha, 2005.
8. SV. CYRIL JERUZALÉMSKÝ. 1997. *Mystagógické katechese*. Velehrad, 1997.
9. SAINT KYRILL, ARCHBISHOP OF JERUSALEM. 1991. *Catechetical and mystery-guiding instructions*. MOSCOW, 1991. /СВЯТИТЕЛЬ КИРИЛЛ АРХИЕПИСКОП ИЕРУСАЛИМСКИЙ. 1991. *Поучения огласительные и тайноводственные*. Москва, 1991./

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM AND HIS SYSTEM OF CATECHESIS

Jan PILKO, assistant professor, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Presov, Masarykova 15, 08001 Presov, Slovakia, jan.pilko@unipo.sk, 00421517724729, ORCID: 0000-0001-8167-5170, Web of Science Researcher ID: AAA-1188-2020

Abstract

Cyril of Jerusalem was an excellent teacher and catechist. In his work he tried to bring to the catechumens all the important parts of the spiritual life of the Church. His systematic approach and logical continuity helped catechumens to enter more easily into the mysteries of Christian life. In this paper we will try to analyze his system as well as to look at some important issues of the life of the Church in the middle of the fourth century.

Keywords

Catechesis, Cyril of Jerusalem, Pedagogical view, Origenes, Church